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SUBJECT: THE IRAQ FACTOR: BAHRAIN'S SHIA OPPOSITION  
RETHINKING POLITICAL BOYCOTT

REF: MANAMA 0024

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) Bahraini Shia supporters of participation in the domestic political process have begun to state their views publicly in an environment heavily influenced by Shia political empowerment in Iraq. In early January, the independent Al Wasat newspaper launched a campaign explicitly urging Bahrain's Shia to drop their boycott of the political system and to participate in elections scheduled for spring and fall of 2006. Al Wasat Editor-in-Chief Mansour Al Jamry, himself a formerly exiled Shia activist leader, has railed against the "phony slogans" of the boycotters and ran a full page interview with top Lebanese Shia cleric Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, who said Bahraini Shia should "enter parliament, object to the constitution, and call for amendments."

2. (C) Summary continued: Bahraini Shia scholar and popular columnist Sayed Dhiya Al Mousawi wrote in his regular column that the boycott did not achieve anything and Shias should "try (their) luck this time with participation." Shaikh Ali Salman, president of leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq, did not address the issue directly but stated in a January 4 speech at the Al Wifaq annual conference, covered by Bahrain's media, that the country's political leadership had "extended its arm" to all those willing to engage in the King's reform process. In the absence of an urgent domestic reason for addressing elections at this time, we believe that attention on the elections in Iraq, and what Bahrain's Shia consider will be potential Shia electoral gains, have led them to take a page from their Iraqi brethren's book and advocate for political participation. End Summary.

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Al Wasat Campaign on Political Participation  
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3. (C) The independent Al Wasat newspaper has printed numerous articles and columns since the beginning of the month urging Bahrain's Shia to participate in the country's political system. There are no elections scheduled until the municipal elections in spring 2006 followed by parliamentary elections in fall 2006, but it is noteworthy and unusual for any newspaper, but particularly Al Wasat, which is strongly tied to the Shia community, to be addressing the question of political participation so directly and relatively early.

4. (C) Al Wasat editor-in-chief Mansour Al Jamry was among the Shia exiles who returned to the island under a general amnesty following the ascension of King Hamad to the throne in 1999 and the launch of his reform program. During the last parliamentary elections, in 2002, most Shia abided by the call of Al Wifaq, the preeminent Shia opposition political society, to boycott. Al Wifaq's position stemmed from what the organization considered to be the King's duplicity regarding legislative branch powers. In their view, the King offered a powerful elected lower house of parliament (the Council of Representatives - COR) in the National Action Charter, a reform proposal that was approved by public referendum in 2000. Then, in the 2001 constitution, the King made the COR weaker than the appointed upper house (the Consultative, or Shura, Council). To protest, Al Wifaq urged Bahrain's Shia, who represent some 70 percent of the population, to boycott the 2002 elections. While not all Shia heeded the call, the boycott campaign significantly dampened Shia participation in the elections and meant that those Shia elected could not legitimately claim they represented the Shia constituency.

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Fadlallah Promotes Shia in Politics  
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5. (SBU) Three years since then, Al Jamry and Al Wasat's editorial board have taken a public stand against the "phony slogans" of the boycotters. The paper published a full-page interview January 3 with prominent Lebanese Shia cleric

Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, who criticized Bahraini Shia opposition for boycotting the 2002 parliamentary elections. In the article, titled, "The Boycott is an Unrealistic Approach to Reform," Fadlallah addresses the Shia tendency to view issues in black and white without appreciating the gray. He says politics is not absolute, like a fatwa (religious opinion), but is nuanced and must be studied. Shia should work to change the system from the inside, even if they consider the system to be unfair.

16. (SBU) Turning directly to Bahrain, Fadlallah told interviewer Sayed Dhiya Al Mousawi that Bahraini Shia should "enter parliament, object to the constitution, and call for amendments." He claims to have pushed Lebanon's Hizballah to participate in politics and run for parliament. He asks, "what has the opposition changed during their absence from parliament? You are on the side (lines) when everyone else is playing on the field." He justifies his position by citing the example of Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's cousin who, Shia believe, should have become Caliph following Mohammed's death rather than Mohammed's companion Abu Bakr. When Abu Bakr became Caliph, Ali continued to offer guidance and advice rather than walk away from the system, says Fadlallah. He says that the focus should be on the country, not the positions of the sects, and authorities should not view Shia as trouble makers.

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Al Jamry, Al Mousawi Amplify the Message  
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17. (SBU) Al Jamry and Al Mousawi have maintained an almost daily drumbeat echoing Fadlallah's message of encouraging Shia to participate in politics. On the same day as publication of the interview, Al Jamry wrote that he hopes the interview will "encourage the silent majority" to express their views publicly instead of "succumbing to the unilateral views" of the boycotters. The opposition must participate and "try to make changes from within the system." Al Mousawi reported on January 4 that the public displayed a "massive positive reaction" to Fadlallah's comments. "The solution to the situation in Bahrain," he continued, "is not another petition, but to try our luck this time with participation. We tried the boycott and look where we stand now."

18. (SBU) On January 8, Al Mousawi wrote that boycotting the elections "did not further issues important to Bahrain such as education, fighting discrimination, and combating corruption." He asks on January 9, "Which is better, a country without a parliament or a country with a parliament that has limited authority? Of course, the second option is better." On January 10, he adds, "After three years of boycott, (the boycotters) proved to all that they had no strategy to tackle the hot unresolved issues. They focused on conferences, rallies, petitions, and statements," when they could have pressured the government on key national issues.

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Cleric Qassem Cites Benefits of Participation  
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19. (SBU) An interview with Bahrain's leading Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem was published in the January 12 edition of Al Wasat. He said, "participating in the upcoming elections falls under the category of 'benefits' that bring more help than cause harm. He added, "resuming negotiations and reaching positive results on unresolved issues will... enlarge the circle of public participation... and consensus." When asked whether he would assist in developing a Shia election list for the 2006 parliamentary elections, like Ayatollah Sistani did in Iraq, Qassem replied that participation would be decided "in light of national and religious interests" and there was no one model for political participation.

110. (SBU) On January 11, Al Wasat provided space for an opponent of political participation to voice his opinion. Political activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, who was convicted of public incitement and harming the reputation of the state before being released by order of King Hamad in mid-November 2004, complained that if Al Wasat had been objective it would have permitted others to write about the boycott and the reasons for it. He said that "each group (i.e., supporters and opponents of the boycott) is talking to itself whereas the decision of participation or boycott must be taken based on what people think will be in the public interest and what serves human rights."

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Salman Recognizes Leadership's "Extended Arm"  
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111. (C) President Shaikh Ali Salman opened Al Wifaq's second annual conference January 4 with a speech addressing Al Wifaq's activities and plans for the coming year. He did not

directly refer to the question of political participation, but he publicly acknowledged the GOB's "blessing" for holding the event. (Note: In their January 3 meeting, the King told the Ambassador that the government was supporting the conference and he expressed his pleasure that Al Wifaq had invited people like former Lebanese PM Salim Al Hoss and Kuwaiti thinker Muhammad Al Rumaihi to participate rather than the "radicals from Qom." (RefTel) End Note.) Salman also said that, in confronting society's problems, "it is possible to rectify the situation if the people have the will and cooperate with the leadership, which has extended its arm to all those willing to engage in the King's reform process."

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Split Inside Al Wifaq  
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¶12. (C) Nizar Al Baharna, a former Al Wifaq board member who formed the Justice and Development political society in September 2004, told PolOff January 18 that he welcomes Al Wasat's campaign. He said that his new society advocates full participation in the 2006 elections with a goal of blunting some of the political influence of Sunni conservatives in the Council of Representatives. Al Wifaq member Nizar Al Qari told PolOff January 18 that of the 30 members on the society's political committee, all but four support participation in the 2006 elections. He said that the two most outspoken advocates for boycotting the political process are Al Wifaq Vice President Hassan Mushaima and Al Wifaq spokesman Abdul Jalil Singace. (Note: Mushaima and Singace visited Washington in December 2004 and spoke at the National Endowment for Democracy. End Note.) Al Qari said that the issue of participation is a "constant" topic of conversation among Al Wifaq's leadership, and several board members are pushing valiantly to convince the hardliners to drop their opposition. Even though Ali Salman has garnered overwhelming support in favor of participation, he does not want to "show his cards" to the government at this point, according to Al Qari. Al Qari anticipates a split in Al Wifaq between Salman and Mushaima, calling the development "inevitable."

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Comment: Iraq Election Rhetoric Promotes Participation  
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¶13. (C) According to Abbas Bu Safwan, a reporter at Al Wasat, Al Mousawi interviewed Fadlallah in September 2004, but Al Wasat delayed publication of the interview until early January. Our contacts have not commented on the decision to run the story at this time, but we believe publicity related to the election in Iraq helped create the right political environment for Al Jamry to launch his campaign. Bahrain's newspapers have run many stories about Ayatollah Sistani, Abdul Aziz Al Hakim, and others urging Iraq's Shia to participate in the January 30 elections, pointing out that the elections represent a golden opportunity for Shia to have a strong voice in governing Iraq. There is no other compelling reason for Al Jamry to publicize this issue at this time, with no elections scheduled until spring 2006. But the press campaign, launched in the context of Iraq's elections, has ignited a public debate that may require a year before Shia leaders take firm decisions on participation.

¶14. (C) Comment continued: While Bahrain's Shia represent some 70 percent of the country's citizens, only seven of the COR's 40 members are part of the Shia-only Al Islamiya bloc, known as the "sleeping bloc" because of its sluggishness. (Note: There are a few Shia in the COR who are independents or are associated with other blocs. End Note.) The Sunni conservative Al Minbar and Al Asala blocs, which total 12 members, are much more active and set the agenda in many ways. Dissatisfaction with the COR's activities, and Sunni conservative deputies' focus on "moral" issues, has prompted some sectors of society that were not involved in the 2002 elections to decide to engage in politics. The Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry announced recently that it had established a committee and \$2.5 million fund to support business-friendly candidates in the 2006 elections (septel).

¶15. (C) Comment continued: With the obvious parallels between Iraqi and Bahraini demographics - that is, majority Shia populations - and Bahraini expectations that Shia will do well in Iraq's elections, some of Bahrain's Shia leaders are taking advantage of what they view as a favorable political environment to advocate dropping the unproductive boycott. We do not know how far this will go, and would be surprised if Ali Salman and Al Wifaq took a formal position to drop the boycott, at least this early in the game. But Al Baharna's Justice and Development society, which was initially seen as a competing alternative to Al Wifaq, may prove to be an allied organization that serves as an Al Wifaq-sanctioned means to Shia political participation. The public debate has just begun, but the conditions are improving for more robust Shia participation in Bahrain's political system.

16. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

ZIADEH